

RIVERA MURALS

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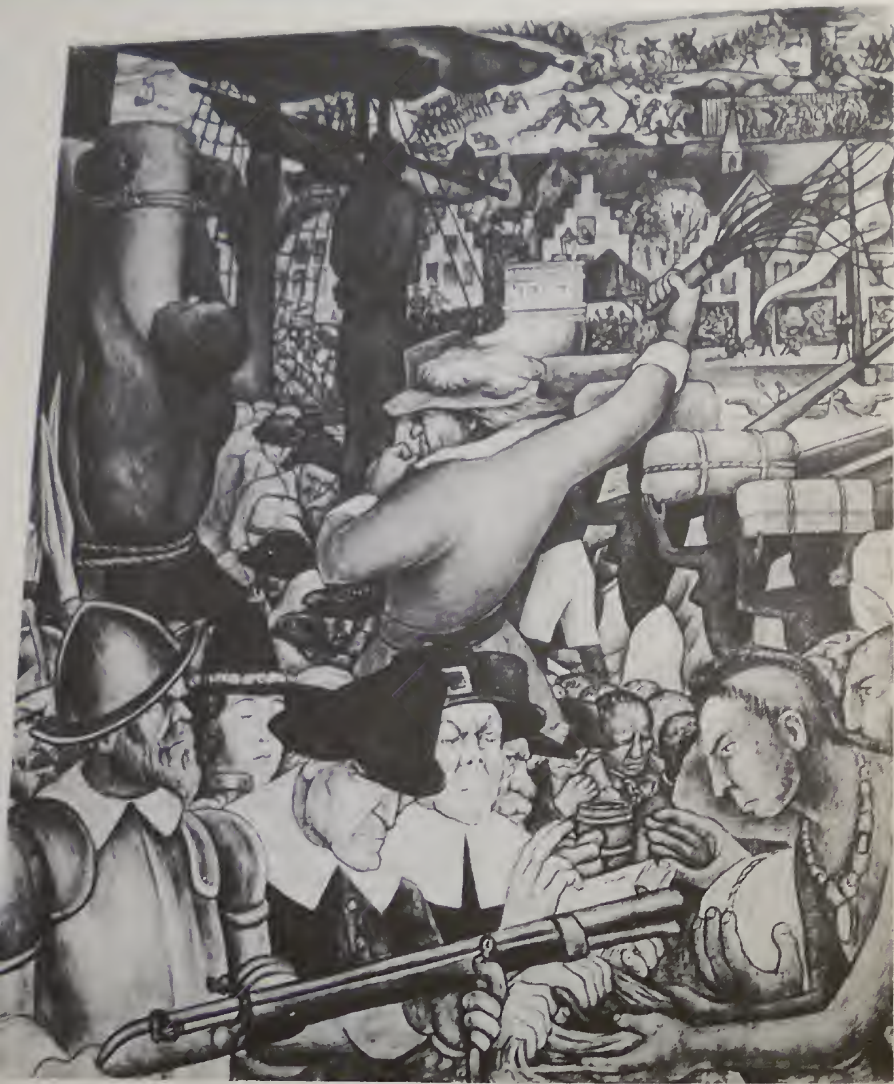
RIVERA from life by Soler

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MENT WORKERS' UNION AT UNITY HOUSE, FOREST PARK, PA.

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Diego Rivera is one of the great painters of all time and one of the greatest muralists of our generation. His murals on American history, most of which are now to be seen on the walls of Unity House, are among his best work. They naturally have a special interest for us in this country for they portray the stirring epic of America. We may not in every case see eye to eye with the painter in his interpretation of men, events and tendencies, but we can never fail to be thrilled by his power, sweep and imagination. The following pages attempt to provide a very brief commentary on these murals, their subject matter, content and pictorial organization. For a much fuller and more illuminating discussion, it would be well to consult "Portrait of America" by Diego Rivera and Bertram D. Wolfe (Covici-Friedel).



P A N E L I C O L O N I A L A M E R I C A

The discovery of America, its exploration and settlement, its early colonial institutions constitute the theme of the first panel.

The background of the panel shows the landing of settlers, the exploration of a river valley, and the dispossessing and ousting of the Indians. The foreground depicts the same ends of conquest being pursued through the more peaceful but no less effective methods of trade. And in between is the story of how the new world was populated with a plentiful and reliable labor supply. Together, fore, back and middle ground form a dynamic whole in theme and treatment.

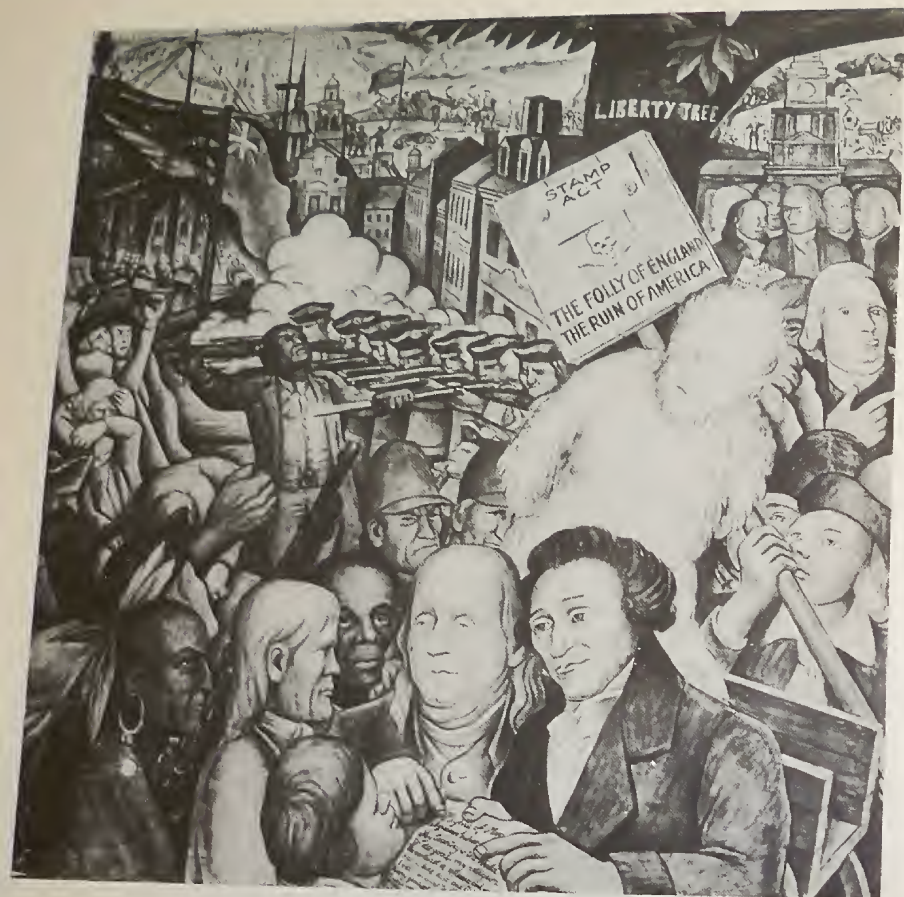
It is worth while to pause a moment to note the hands in the foreground. "The hands, as in all of Rivera's work, are eloquent: the eager, trembling hand reaching for the 'firewater', the formalistic, hypocritical hand administering a blessing, the careless hand from which a skin slides as if the Indian held material objects of little account, and the grasping, clutching hands of a trader." (Wolfe.)

The Indian, driven from his ancient heritage, was debauched and maltreated, but he could not be enslaved and turned into a servile laboring force. For that poor immigrants, white Europeans, indentured servants bought and sold to work off their passage, were imported. Rivera shows them coming from the ship, sad-faced and weary as they disembark for the auction block.

After the white slaves came the black. A line of them is seen leaving the slave ship. This line, moving down from the boat to the foreground, runs parallel to another line, moving in the opposite direction, composed of black men and women naked to the waist loading the ship with a cargo of goods produced in America.

Dominating the middle ground of the picture is the figure of a white master flogging a Negro slave.

Such is early colonial America as Rivera sees it. He does not, however, see it all as negative, as a record of destruction, enslavement, cruelty and exploitation; he sees and depicts certain positive features as well — productive labor, the unconquerable spirit of the American Indian who refused to be enslaved, the rebelliousness of the Negro slave.



PANEL II THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

This panel and the one that follows are devoted to the American Revolution, its background, its ebb and flow, its tides of radicalism and reaction. For this theme Rivera has selected a number of central figures, outstanding personalities of the Revolution, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson (in Panel III) and Sam Adams. Franklin and Paine, expounding the rights of man to a backwoodsman, an Indian and a Negro, dominate the foreground. To Rivera these figures symbolize the fundamental historic significance of the American Revolution. The scroll which Paine is holding and to which Franklin points bears the titles of two of Paine's works ("The Rights of Man" and "Agrarian Justice") as well as the following characteristic utterances of his:

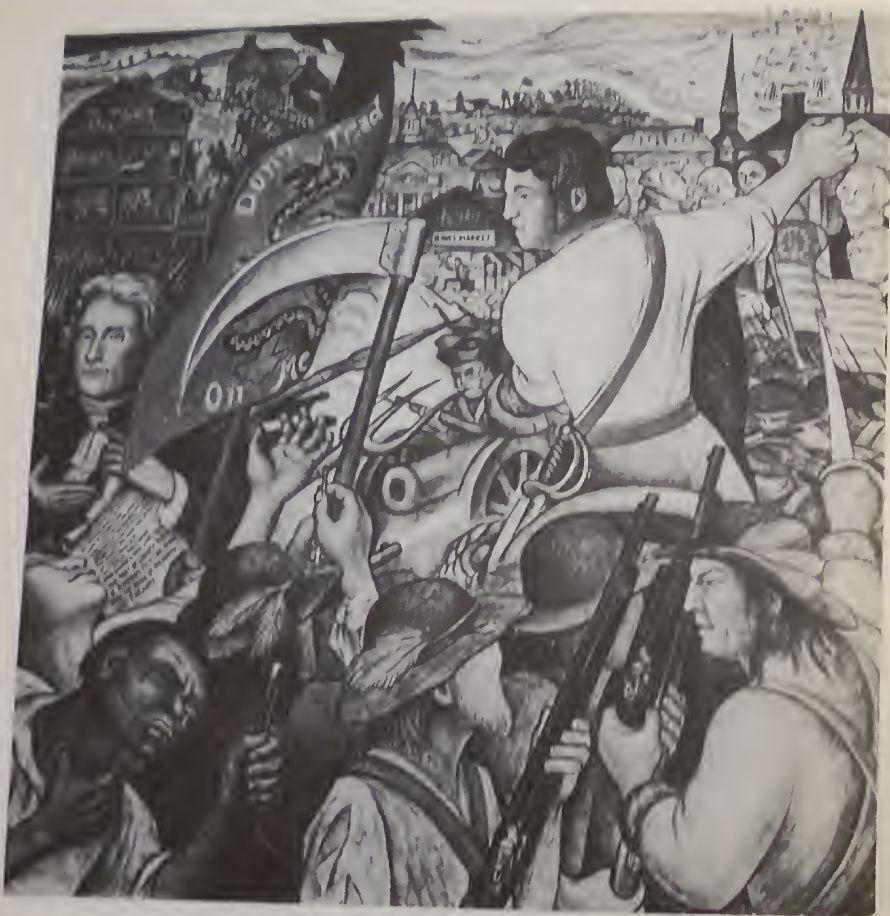
My country is the world; to do good my religion.

*The contrast of affluence and wretchedness is like
dead and living bodies chained together.*

In this series of murals Rivera indicates his central figures not merely by position but also by a scroll or by a finger or hand pointing the way. Paine holds the scroll; Franklin points to it. Towards the right of the middle ground is Sam Adams, the great organizer of the Revolution, also pointing with his hand. Behind him is Independence Hall, with a group of members of the Continental Congress holding the Declaration of Independence. And behind them in the far background, are those whom Rivera considers the conservative leaders of the Revolution, typified by Washington. There is also a reminder of the limitations of the new freedom in the scene of slave labor immediately behind Independence Hall.

The dynamic movement of this panel is secured through the depiction of action and the clash of opposing forces: popular resistance to the Stamp Act, the tarring and feathering of a tax collector by the Sons of Liberty, the Boston Tea Party, the Boston Massacre (in which Crispus Attucks, escaped Negro slave, is shown as one of the victims).

Thus the thematic double movement of the first panel—the "line of rebellion" and the "line of oppression"—is continued in this, but whereas the former was so predominantly "negative," this one seethes with forward movement, rebelliousness and popular action for freedom.



PANEL III REVOLUTION AND REACTION

Panel III depicts the last phase of the American Revolution—the separation and mutual confrontation of the right and left wings of the great popular movement that achieved independence.

There is swift movement diagonally from Jefferson, who dominates the left of the middle ground, through Daniel Shays, the leader of the revolt of 1786, to Washington and his group at the extreme right. Fore and back ground fall in with this fundamental line of movement.

Jefferson holds and points to a scroll with some of his characteristic revolutionary utterances. Shays is leading the poverty-stricken masses of New England in revolt against intolerable economic and political conditions. Confronting them stand Washington and Hamilton, surrounded by the liberal aristocrats who had come to America to help it win independence: Lafayette, Kosciuszko, De Kalb and Von Steuben. This group, in Rivera's view, represents the new conservative ruling power of the young nation. But yesterday united against Britain, the right and left wings now confront each other in armed hostility.

Thus does Rivera depict the opposing forces of this final stage of the Revolution.

To the left of the old Revolutionary "Rattlesnake" flag is a concentrated representation of a revolutionary headquarters. It contrasts with the buildings on the right, court house, slave market, etc., the citadels of the conservatives. In one form or another, this contrast pervades the entire panel.

In the first panel the antithesis is between the white master on one side and the Indian, indentured servant, and Negro slave on the other. In the second panel, it is between the British authority and the Revolutionary patriots; in this third panel, it is between the masses of the farmers, artisans, and backwoodsmen and the new upper class Federalist ruling group. Such is the movement of early American history as interpreted by Diego Rivera in these murals.



PANEL IV: EXPANSION AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

In this fourth panel, Rivera depicts in dynamic synthesis the two basic undercurrents of American life, divergent, conflicting, yet in the long run strangely merging into each other: territorial, economic and material expansion on the one hand and the utopian vision of a better world on the other. The two are America.

In the foreground are the great New England Transcendentalists, Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau. They are expounding the American Dream to the simple folk of the land. "It is a country of beginnings, of projects, of vast designs and expectations. It has no past; all has an onward and prospective look" (Emerson). "All things invite the earth's inhabitants to rear their lives to an unheard of height and meet the expectation of the land" (Thoreau).

Thoreau is pointing up and out to a line of covered wagons headed towards a dim and distant dream Utopia. But note, the skyline of Utopia blends into the skyline of an 1840 mill town in the center background, which in turn runs into the skyline of the West towards which Sam Houston, flanked by Brigham Young and Sam Austin, is pointing. The central figure of the middle ground is President Polk, his hand grasping the Oregon and Mexican territories.

Look again at the distant Utopia and you see that its architecture strangely resembles that of the National Bank, the citadel of the new plutocracy, in the left background. Directly in front of the Bank stands Alexander Hamilton, who of all the earlier Revolutionary figures alone remains in this panel because it was Hamilton and not Jefferson who in the long run was destined to shape America. In front of him stand the prototypes of the new money kings, John Jacob and William B. Astor. And before them stands Andrew Jackson, Old Hickory, scowling and puzzled at the shape things are beginning to assume.

The other great element of the scene is machinery and invention. In the right foreground there is Samuel F. B. Morse, the painter who has put away his palette to turn to invention. There are the sewing machine, the telegraph, the railroad, the steamboat, the factories and their belching chimneys.

Here we have America in the making: boundless resources and energy, generous enthusiasms, noble dreams and aspirations, all somehow flowing into the main stream of national development, the mighty stream of capitalistic expansion.



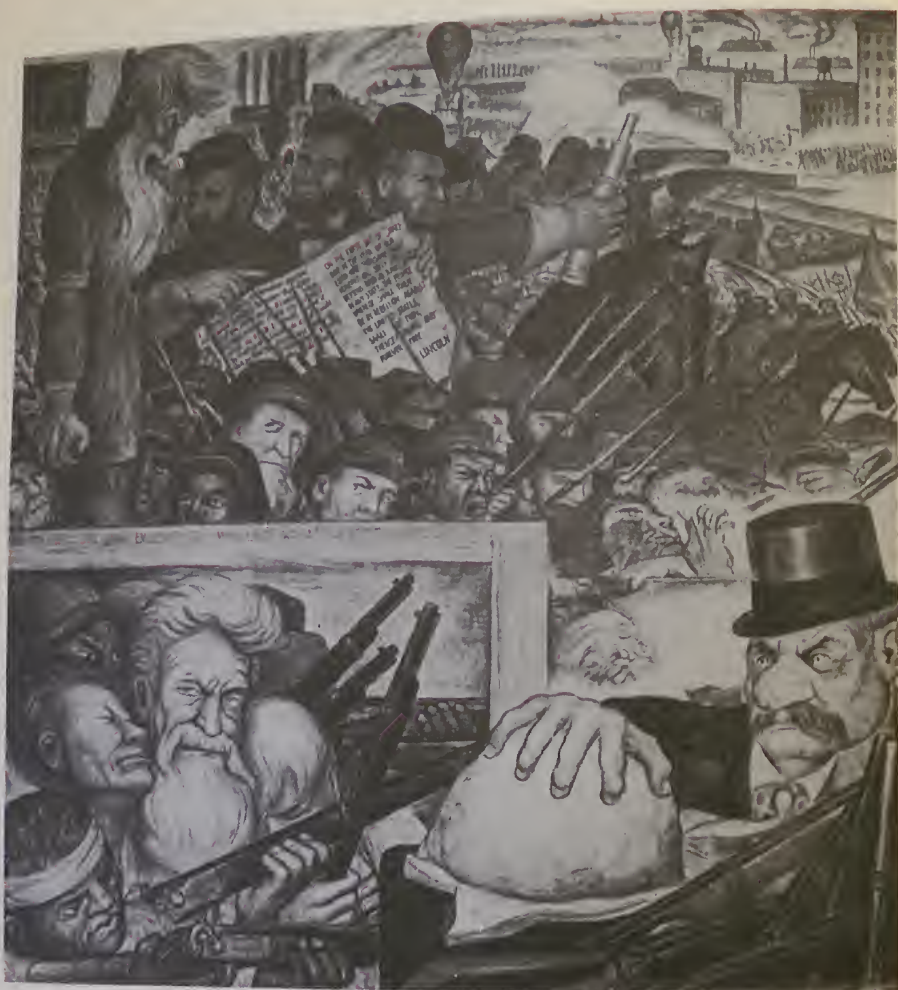
PANEL V THE GROWING CONFLICT OVER SLAVERY

The Mexican War and the discovery of gold in California form the background of this panel because they did indeed form the historical background of the growing conflict over slavery that culminated in the Civil War.

Above the wall of the prison cell in which Thoreau is imprisoned for refusing to pay poll tax in support of the "iniquitous" Mexican War are the heads of Generals Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott, and behind them are battle scenes from that war. The same Thoreau who in the previous panel was pointing to Utopia is now bitterly arraigining the American slave state (see the scroll in his hand). The map which in Panel IV President Polk was covering with his hand reappears on the prison wall, but now the hand has left a bloody imprint on the conquered territory.

The middle and foreground of this panel are given over to the ominous conflict itself. Slaves, slave auctioneers and slave drivers fill most of the middle, serving as a secondary background. It is in the foreground that the clash of personalities takes place. John C. Calhoun, the brilliant South Carolina statesman, is stationed before Thoreau's prison cell with a scroll in his hand; he is the great champion and apologist for slavery. In line with him to the right of the panel are Nat Turner and John Brown, leaders of great slave revolts. Immediately below, in the right foreground, are the distinguished Abolitionist leaders, Frederick Douglass, himself once a slave; William Lloyd Garrison (with the glasses), and Wendell Phillips (holding the scroll). Further left there is Harriet Beecher Stowe, with her world-famous book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Sojourner Truth, Negro woman Abolitionist.

Thus do the opposing forces confront each other on the level of idea as well as on the level of action. But the struggle itself is still unresolved. Under the spur of the kind of hostile forces depicted in this panel, the country is being driven at headlong speed towards the great and final judgment of the Civil War.



P A N E L V I T H E C I V I L W A R

This panel is linked both thematically and historically with the one that precedes and the one that follows. The Civil War was the middle phase of a great historical movement that opened with Abolitionism and closed with the period of Reconstruction. John Brown, Abraham Lincoln and J. P. Morgan are the three figures that dominate this mural. The central figure is John Brown, Rivera's hero. He is shown twice in this panel, in the lower as well as in the upper foreground, occupying the entire "beginning" (left) of the picture.

In the lower section Brown is seen leading the historical raid on Harper's Ferry. (The section is set off by a wooden frame on which are inscribed Karl Marx's words: "Labor with a white skin cannot emancipate itself where labor with a black skin is branded.") In the upper section John Brown is shown hanged after the failure of his uprising, but as the famous song has it, "his soul goes marching on" in the long lines of Union soldiers. Thus Rivera makes John Brown's raid pictorially the "cornerstone" and his hanging the "starting point" of the Civil War.

From John Brown we move to Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln, flanked by two Union generals, holds a double-columned inscription, on one side a middle-of-the-road pronouncement of earlier days, and on the other the Emancipation Proclamation.

There is profound irony in John Brown, hanged for striving to emancipate the slaves, staring with sightless eyes at the Emancipation Proclamation issued only a few years after his death by the President of the United States.

The third great figure is that of J. P. Morgan the First placed in the right foreground. Morgan appears here in his own right and as representative of the merchants and capitalists who managed to coin millions out of the war. Rivera portrays him with his very expressive right hand on his money bag, surrounded by the defective rifles from the sale of which, according to report, he made a fortune. In the immediate background we see these same rifles exploding in the faces of Union soldiers. Mr. Morgan's left hand reaches into the next panel where it subsidizes the Ku Klux Klan in the Reconstruction period.

The remote background at the very top of the picture contains battle scenes on land and sea as well as a scene from the New York draft riots.



PANEL VII RECONSTRUCTION

This panel is an immediate continuation of the sixth. It depicts the aftermath of the Civil War and the clash of forces in that "tragic era."

Rivera sees the historical movement of this period as the conflict between Radical Reconstruction and the combined reactionary forces of North and South. The foreground of the panel is devoted to a portrayal of these forces in terms of the outstanding personalities of the time.

In the right foreground we have two great Radical Republicans: Benjamin Wade, at the extreme right, and Thaddeus Stevens next to him holding a scroll giving the Radical program (in the words of Stevens):

It is a radical revolution intended to remodel our institutions. It is intended to work a radical reorganization in the Southern institutions, habits and manners . . . The foundations . . . must be broken up and relaid, or all our blood and treasure have been spent in vain.

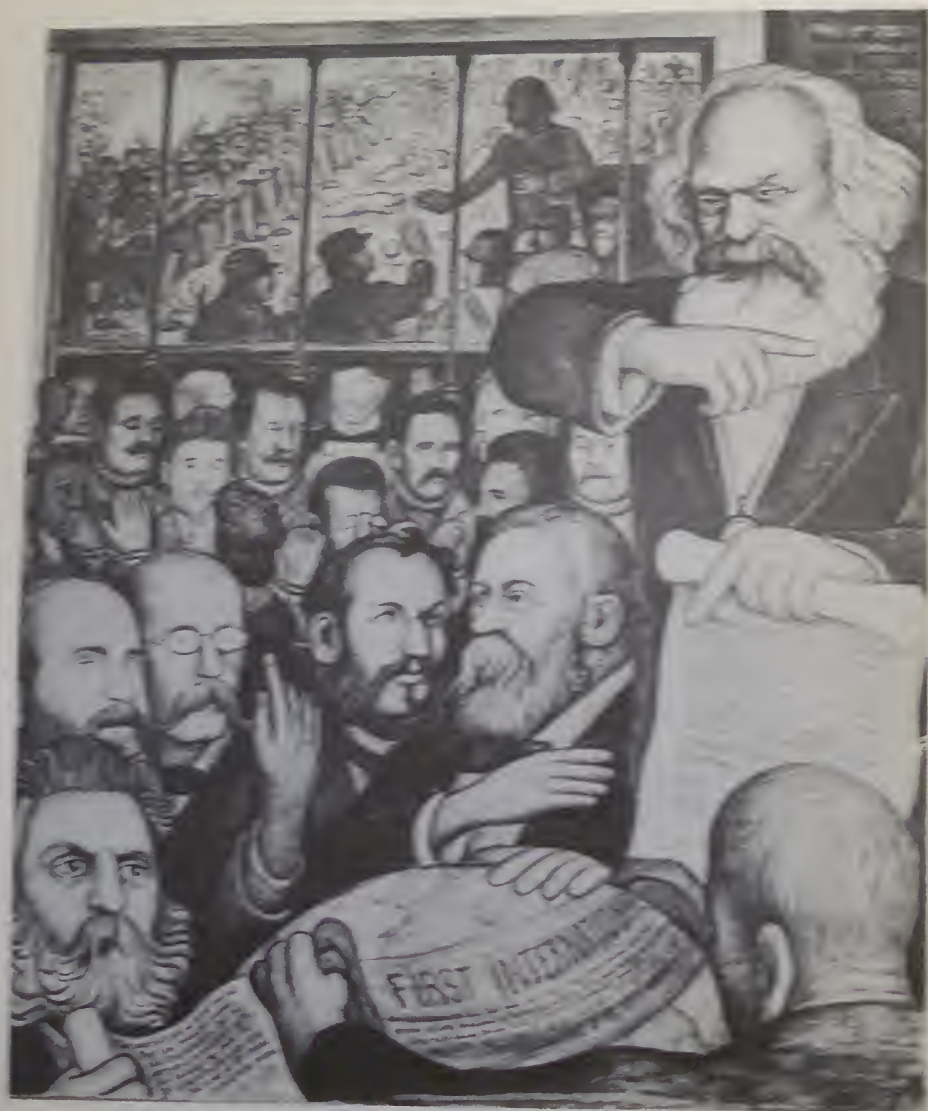
Immediately above Stevens is Charles Sumner, the distinguished Massachusetts Senator. And a little higher up Rivera somewhat arbitrarily places the great poet, Walt Whitman, who can hardly be said to belong to this group of Radicals. Whitman holds a scroll with these words:

A great city is that which has the greatest men and women, where slave ceases and the master of the slave ceases, where the populace arises at once against the never-ending audacity of elected persons.

This is the radical side. The other side Rivera symbolizes in the Ku Klux Klan, whose Grand Imperial Wizard appears in mask and full regalia in the center foreground. From the preceding panel extends the hand of J. P. Morgan subsidizing these forces of darkness and terror. Thus is suggested the alliance of reaction, North and South.

The rest of the panel is given over to a depiction of the horrors of the post-war years in the South. There are the Klan Konklave, the fiery cross, the burning and hanging of Negroes, the night riders, the chain gang. But in the extreme right background we have also scenes of spreading industrialism and reaction in the North, strikers being driven back by mounted police, coolie labor constructing the transcontinental railroad.

It was a hard, brutal, ruthless period, already big with the growing social conflicts of the next decade. And so Rivera pictures it.



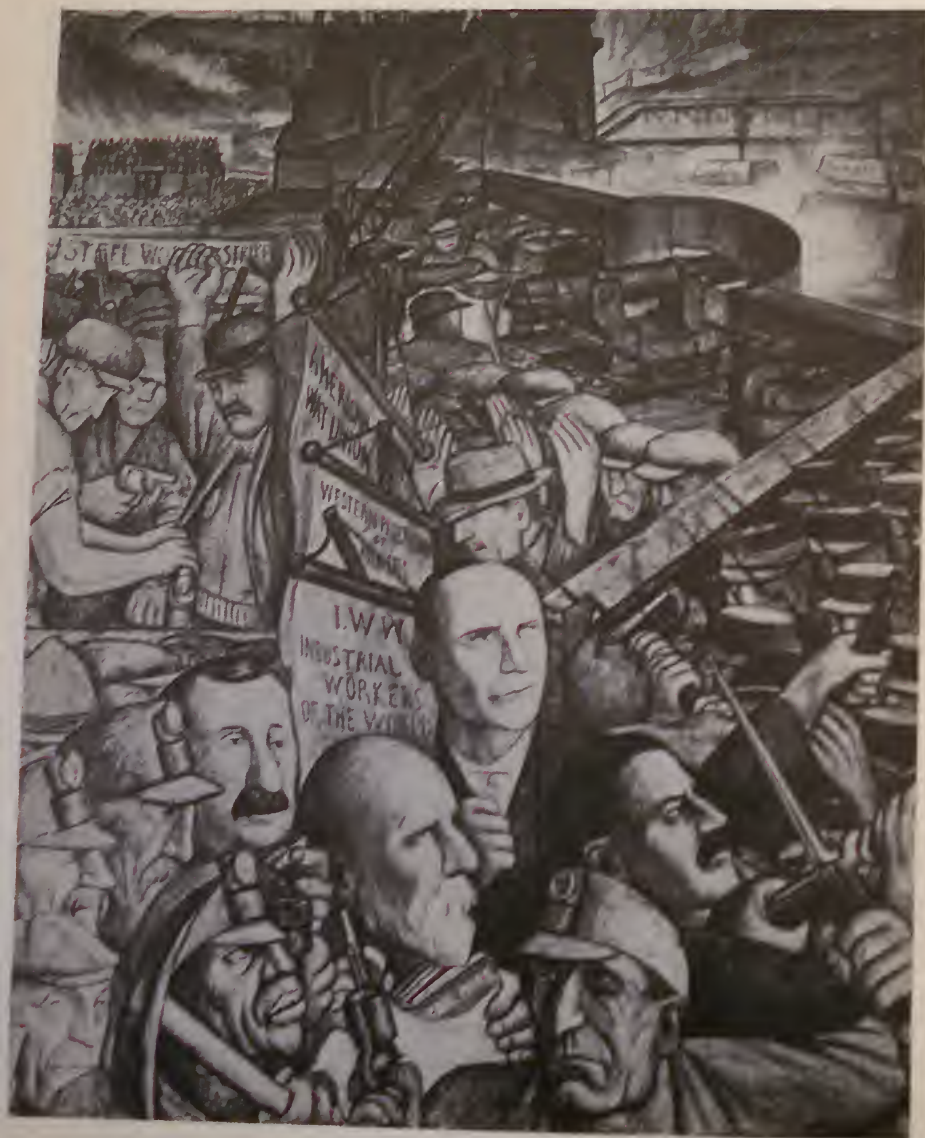
PANEL VIII THE LABOR MOVEMENT AND LABOR RADICALISM

This panel introduces a fundamental change of theme in the pageant of American history depicted by Rivera in these murals. It introduces a change in subject matter as well as in mood and treatment. It is a change that corresponds to the basic shift of social and economic forces in the decades following the Civil War.

Heretofore the fundamental "line of conflict" has been on an agrarian basis; now it is shifting to an industrial basis and the main theme is the rise of labor radicalism and the labor movement.

The foreground of the panel, dominated by the gigantic figure of Karl Marx, is given over to the portrayal of the great teachers and leaders of labor in this early period. At the extreme left is Johann Most, the apostle of anarchism. Above him is Henry George, economist and foe of monopoly in land. Next to George is Terence V. Powderly, Grand Master Workman of the Knights of Labor, and beside Powderly is William S. Webb, head of the National Labor Union and a great figure among early American labor leaders. Between Webb and the gigantic figure of Karl Marx is Friedrich Engels, Marx's close friend and co-worker, who points to the scroll in Marx's hand, on which is inscribed Marx's rather sanguine forecast of American class development.

The middle and background of the panel Rivera devotes to Haymarket, that dreadful culmination of a period of labor upsurge and governmental repression. In the upper background, through the frame of the gallows, we see Fielden, one of the Chicago anarchists, speaking at that momentous meeting of May 4, 1886, as the police attack begins and the bomb is thrown. Directly below Rivera has painted the Haymarket martyrs, Spies, Parsons, Fischer and Engel, with the hangman's noose about their necks. The great social struggle of modern times, the struggle between labor and capital, is already under way.



PANEL IX INDUSTRIAL CONFLICT AND CLASS WAR

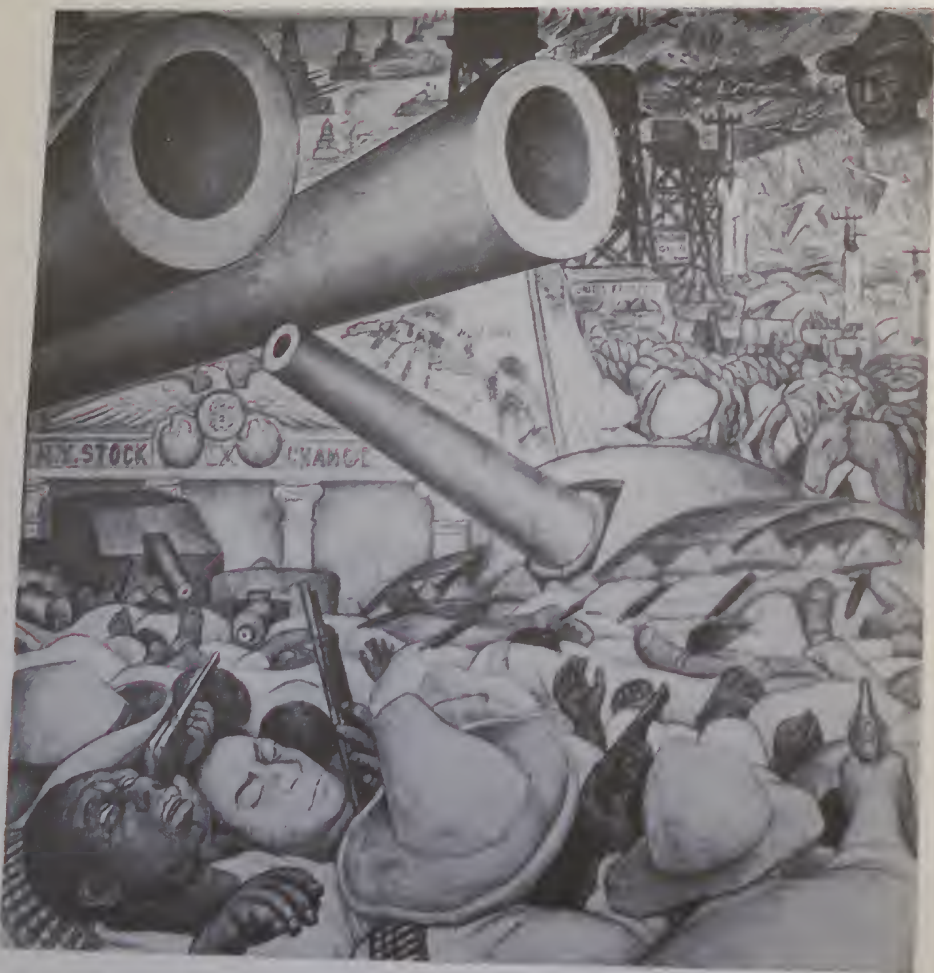
The antagonistic social forces indicated in their early stages in the preceding panel now reach their maturity. Violent class conflict is raging throughout America's great industries, militant unions are springing up, great leaders and organizers are appearing at the head of vast armies of workers.

The background, set against an upper background dark with the smoke of modern industry and the lowering clouds of class war, shows scenes from the great Homestead (steel) and Pullman (railroad) strikes, representing a series of labor conflicts in the basic industries.

The foreground is again given over to the powerful personalities of the period. Holding a volume of Karl Marx is Daniel De Leon, Socialist pioneer and teacher. Directly to the right is the familiar figure of Eugene Victor Debs, the greatest Socialist leader our country has ever produced. And to his right, significantly facing a bayonet, is William Haywood "Big Bill"—the fiery agitator and leader of the IWW. In these three arranged in triangular keystone fashion, Rivera sees the proletarian leadership of the time.

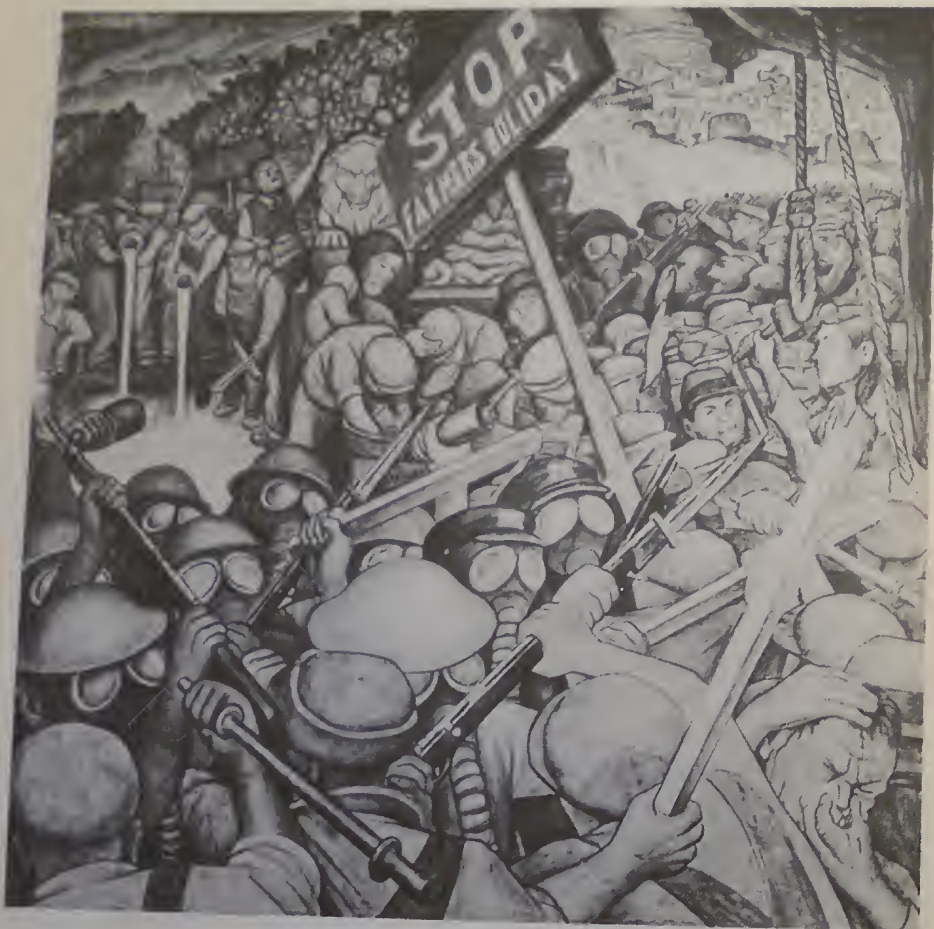
Around these representative leaders is a swirl of striking coal and metal miners, Pinkertons being disarmed (the men with the raised hands) and soldiers coming to their support, assaulting steel workers and railroad workers.

It might be well at this point to recapitulate the thematic double movement running through these murals from first to last. On the one side is the "line of oppression": white masters and slave owners (Panel I), British rulers (III), the conservative "rich and well-born" of the new nation (III), the rising money and commercial power (IV), the slave power (V), the slave power and emerging industrial capitalism (VI), Northern capitalists and Southern plantation aristocracy (VIII), unbridled industrial capitalism (VIII, IX). On the other side is the "line of rebellion": Indians, indentured servants and slaves (II), Revolutionary patriots (II), Jeffersonian democrats and "lower-class" rebels (III), the great New England idealists (IV), Abolitionists and slave-revolt leaders (V), the Union forces inspired by John Brown (VI), the Radical Republicans (VIII), the pioneers of labor radicalism (VIII), the great leaders of the embattled workers (IX).



PANEL X IMPERIALISM IN LATIN AMERICA

This panel is devoted to a stirring pictorial denunciation of United States imperialism in Latin America in the old days before the "good neighbor" policy. The tone of this panel is set by a long line of battleships leading from the remote background of the picture to the flagship with the huge cannon. In their shadow are the islands of the Caribbean upon which two bloody hands have left their stain. The huge guns tower protectingly over the Stock Exchange building, marked with the dollar sign and an eagle grasping two hemispheres in its claws. The two hemispheres and the dollar sign form three balls, the familiar sign of the pawn broker. Just behind the American flag in the center middle ground are the warehouses of the United Fruit Company and the derricks of Standard Oil, two powerful American combines dominating a large sector of the economic life of Latin America. Vast streams of bananas are pouring into the company's warehouses and beyond are peasants working in the fields. Bodies of rebel peons hang from telegraph posts, and in the upper background are to be seen U. S. Marines "restoring order" somewhere in Latin America. In the foreground we see the other side of the story, the resistance of the Latin American patriots. Out of the slaughter rises the face of a dead Central American Negro and next to him stares the dead face of Julio Antonio Mella, Cuban student leader assassinated by Butcher Machado. This "line of rebellion" leads straight up to the upper right-hand corner, to the grim and determined face of Augusto Cesar Sandino, Nicaraguan patriot, who to Rivera is the symbol of the entire Latin American struggle against foreign imperialism.



PANEL XI DEPRESSION AND UNREST

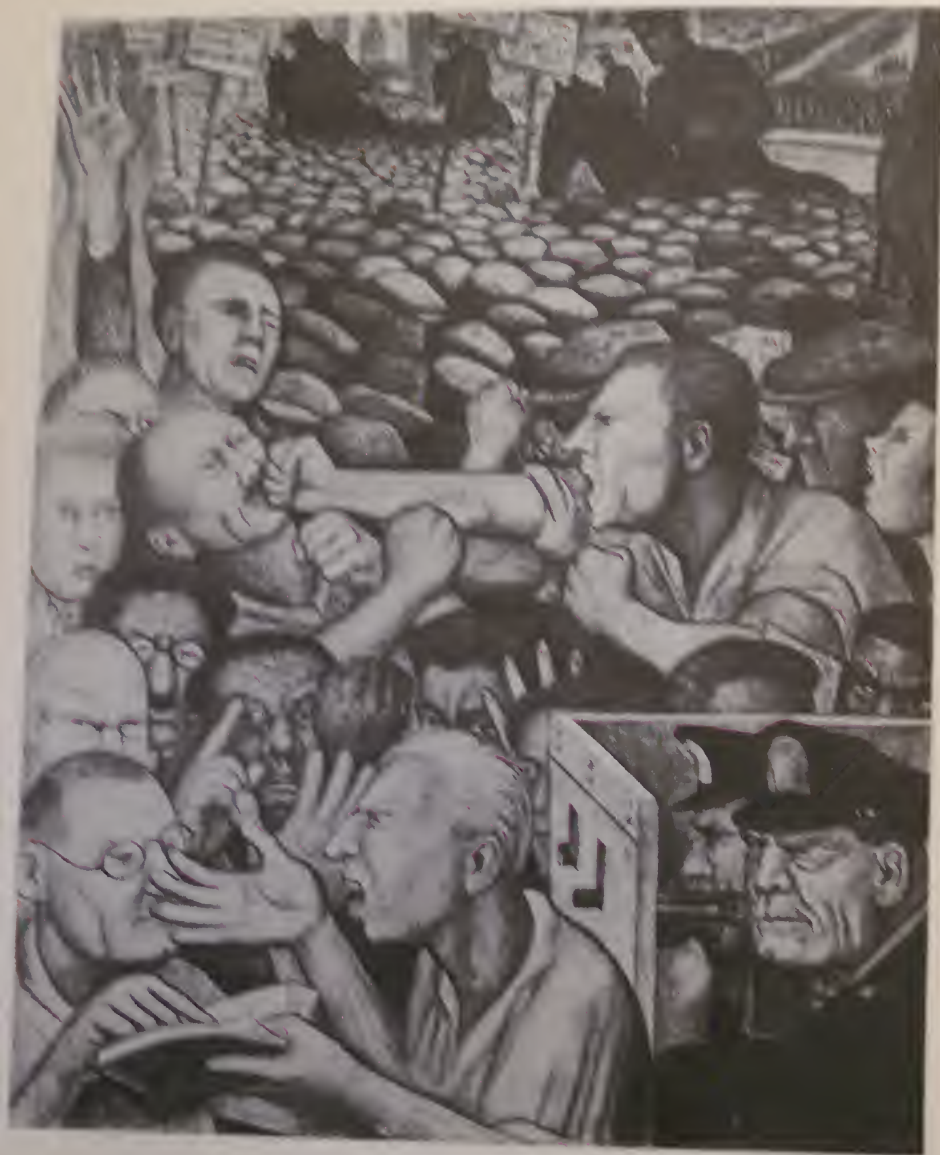
The grotesque and insensate contradiction of starvation in the midst of plenty is pictured on this panel with unforgettable power and imagination. Here, for once, there are no leading personalities dominating the scene; the masses are everywhere, and behind the masses is the inscrutable play of economic and social forces.

It is a picture of the years of depression. At the top to the right, against the background of the Capitol, we see the famous "battle" of Anacostia Flats, in which federal troops attacked the ragged lines of World War veterans who had come to Washington to ask for relief. Rivera shows the moment of attack, the camp in flames. In the foreground the theme is continued: fully armed and equipped policemen are charging a group of embattled farmers who are resisting expropriation for debt. Directly above is a sheriff trying to auction off a farm in a foreclosure sale. Over his head hangs a noose. The farmers are determined to keep their land.

In the left background we have another aspect of the crisis. Farmers are at work not raising food but destroying it. Mountains of fruit and vegetables are rotting in the fields. Gallons of milk are being poured into the creek. But the unemployed in the cities (center of the panel) are grubbing in the garbage can for refuse to eat. Huge quantities of food destroyed while millions are starving: two sides of the same picture of economic insanity.

A little above the group of hungry harvesters of garbage, broken derelicts sleep on the stone steps of the gold-enameled sub-treasury.

Hunger marchers, bonus marchers, foreclosure fighters, farm strikers, starvation in the midst of plenty, and the army and national guard to see that the hungry do not get their food, that the veterans do not get their bonus, that the farmers do not get the cost of production nor save their farms from foreclosure—such is Rivera's living, stirring picture of the depression (Wolfe).



PANEL XII UNREST AND CONFUSION

This panel is a companion piece to the one preceding. It is a picture of the confusion and division of counsel among the workers during the great depression.

In the right background is a long breadline showing the plight of the jobless. The panel as a whole is dominated by one of the great unemployment demonstrations of the early thirties. In this demonstration Rivera intends to represent the strength and power of the workers when united.

But as we proceed to the foreground, the entire picture is changed. Here there is dissension, confusion and division among those who aspire to give guidance to the working class. Here the signs—"We Are the Only . . .", "No One . . . Only Us"—express the sectarian spirit of these leaders and would-be leaders. Not only do they (the two figures in the left foreground) debate acrimoniously and endlessly over fine points of theory and policy, but they even pass to outright physical violence (two figures in the center) against each other. Meanwhile, the forces of reaction symbolized by the policeman threatening with club and machine gun, are waiting for the moment to pounce.

The foreground is clogged with restless flying heads, expressive heads reminiscent of those of Panel I . . . It is the heads more than anything else that give the feeling of disquiet to the picture . . . (Woffel).

From this picture of working class dissunity, it is a natural transition to the next showing the consequence of such dissunity—the triumph of fascism.




P A N E L X I I I N A Z I K U L T U R

This panel is dominated by the counterposition of Hitler and his victims. In the foreground, below the figure of the mad Fuehrer screaming into a microphone, we see Albert Einstein (left) and the tortured body of a Jew whose sin is his "blood." Next is a German girl punished and humiliated for the "crime" of "racial impurity." To the right of the tortured girl is the bloodthirsty Goering, true symbol of Nazi culture.

Another symbol of Nazi culture is the sterilization process portrayed in the center of the panel—modern science in the service of ruthless barbarism. Moving left we see flames rise from a Nazi "book burning," in which the works of Mann and Remarque, of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Engels and Thalheimer, of Einstein and Boas, can be distinguished. And immediately below, under the menace of a long knife, are a number of German radical leaders, Thaelmann, Toergler and Brandler.

Still another set of symbols of Nazi culture are to be found at the right background: a Nazi mass meeting side by side with a Nazi concentration camp, and below the torture of prisoners and a ceremonial beheading by a headsman in full dress.

Finally, behind the Nazi banners, in the left background we see swinging lines of helmeted marching armies, with tanks and airplanes, all moving towards the war to come. In this panel Rivera has strikingly captured the full horror and menace of German Nazism. In dynamic movement he passes in review one aspect after the other of its barbarous program: racial persecution, outlawing of all independent thinking, crushing of the labor movement, bestial repressions, cultural vandalism, ruthless war of conquest. The pictorial treatment and the theme are in perfect balance.



The permanent exhibition of Rivera murals hangs in the modern lounge room at Unity House, owned and operated on a non-profit basis by the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. Here on the shores of a large spring-fed lake circled by a thousand acres of woodland and lawn in the cool Pocono mountains of Pennsylvania is every imaginable convenience for comfort, relaxation and sport. Rivera pictured the struggles; Unity House is one of the results.

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